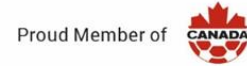




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May 5, 2021

**Premier Doug Ford**

Premier's Office  
Room 281  
Legislative Building, Queen's Park  
Toronto, Ontario  
M7A 1A1

Cc: Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Ontario  
Cc: Lisa MacLeod, Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries  
Cc: Christine Elliot, Minister of Health  
Cc: Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

Dear Premier Ford,

During the Canadian Mental Health Association's (CMHA) 70<sup>th</sup> annual Mental Health Week, May 3-9, Ontario Soccer is urgently renewing our plea for the Government of Ontario to rescind its ban on organized outdoor sport and allow our membership to safely Return to Play at the earliest opportunity.

The CMHA teaches us that regardless of whether we have a mental illness, our mental health is something we can protect and nurture. Organized and controlled outdoor activity is a key way to achieve this in a safe and affordable manner. Tragically, and for far too long, organized outdoor play has not been available as an accessible way for all Ontarians to take care of themselves, irrespective of their background, demographic, or socio-economic status.

Our member organizations in every corner of the Province have patiently supported the current stay-at-home order, to play our part in overcoming this third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with every passing day that children are kept away from soccer pitches, baseball diamonds, basketball courts, and other outdoor playing fields and facilities, **a mental health crisis grows.**

It is time we take the mental health of three million children and youth in Ontario seriously. Indeed, continuing to dismiss their physical and mental well-being as a necessary trade-off for combating COVID-19 is no longer acceptable. On behalf of the 500,000 sidelined

participants under our care, this social and physical neglect of our children and youth must stop.

Recently, a coalition of Ontario Soccer member organizations [surveyed](#) over 3,500 community families and found that without soccer: 86% of children and youth lacked social connection, 82% lamented a loss of routine, and a 67% lacked important structure in their day-to-day lives.

Furthermore, 40% of respondents identified experiencing anxiety, stress, and worry, while 20% noted depression. If left unchecked, these problems will soon become a major burden on Ontario long after COVID-19 is under control. As you know, children's hospitals in Ontario have seen an unprecedented increase in ER visits during the pandemic for mental health concerns<sup>1</sup>. In fact, according to Children's Healthcare Canada (2021), children's hospitals "are experiencing, on average, double the number of admissions following attempted suicide, a three-fold increase in admissions related to substance use, and a 60% increase in the number of admissions related to eating disorders"<sup>2</sup>.

[Studies](#) are increasingly showing that predictable environments protect child mental health during the pandemic. Your leadership is thus urgently needed to swiftly restore the predictable, safe, and structured surroundings that promote resilience in children and youth. Outdoor organized and controlled sports exemplify the type of environment in which children and youth flourish. They provide an essential service for our children, youth, and adult participants to stay healthy and fit, with a [demonstrated minimal risk of community transmission](#).

Leading medical organizations like the Canadian Pediatric Society of Canada ([open letter by Kimberly Dow and Eddy Lau](#)) and infectious disease specialists such as [Dr. Andrew Morris](#), [Dr. Zac Feilchenfeld](#), [Dr. Isaac Bogoch](#), and [Dr. Peter Juni](#), have all spoken out in support of outdoor activities and sports being re-opened. Their advocacy stems from the research that demonstrates that staying physically active has a well-established benefit on physical and [mental health](#); one that extends beyond the period of exercise.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaillancourt, T., Szatmari, P., Geogiades, K., & Krygsman, A. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on the Mental Health of Canadian Children and Youth. Royal Society of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> [Children's Healthcare Canada. \(2021\). Expanding urgent health supports for Canada's children and youth.](#)



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This position is also held by the Ontario Government's Science Table – the Covid-19 Advisory for Ontario – in their paper [Fighting COVID-19 in Ontario: The Way Forward](#) states: “Maintaining social connections and outdoor activity are important to our overall physical and mental health. This means allowing small groups of people from different households to meet outside ... and clearly encouraging safe outdoor activities.”

The Ontario Government's Science Table also stated that what will not work in the fight against COVID-19 are “**policies that discourage safe outdoor activity**”. In fact, such policies “**will disproportionately harm children and those who do not have access to their own greenspace, especially those living in crowded conditions.**”

The Ontario Medical Association agreed with the statements put forward by the Ontario Government's Science Table and issued their [own supporting statement](#).

Medical Leaders agree that outdoor sports are a low-risk, high-benefit pursuit for children and youth to engage in to safely reclaim their health and well-being. In our letter sent to Dr. Williams on March 25, we clearly outlined [how organized outdoor sports is one of the safest places for children](#) to be right now.

Just as importantly, there is an [overwhelming consensus](#) (84%) among your voting constituency, that sports have a positive impact on their child's mental health and/or stress levels. Moreover, 20% of youth participants surveyed indicated they were so discouraged and disenfranchised with the perpetual restrictions on their sporting activity that they no longer planned to return to sport at all post-COVID restrictions. This loss is one that will be shouldered by communities. Sports build citizens who are productive, adaptive, creative, and healthy—the very characteristics needed for prosperity.

All things considered; it is imperative that participants **Return** to meaningful **Play** in the very near future. When the latest Shutdown ends, we are requesting the Government of Ontario allow children, youth, and adults to engage in training and appropriate modified competition as outlined in our 77 page [Ontario Soccer Return to Play Guide and Safety Protocols](#) that is currently in use by our membership throughout Ontario.

We can assure you as a Provincial Sports Organization registered under the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries and a member association of Canada Soccer, our sanctioned member organizations implement and follow our health and safety protocols and are fully aligned with directives from the Government of Ontario and/or their regional public health units.



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In summary, upon re-opening Ontario Soccer and our membership will continue to implement our controlled and organized [Return to Play Plan](#) to safely manage the insidiously damaging effects Covid-19 has had on Ontarians. A return to play will also serve to help curtail the growing mental health crisis in children and youth. As stated in a recent comprehensive review on the effects of COVID-19 closures on mental health, “children and youth flourish in environments that are predictable, safe, and structured”<sup>1</sup>.

Our soccer programs exemplify these characteristics, which is why we have rallied our grassroots community to help children and youth overcome this generational challenge through the kind of resolve and resilience only sport can offer.

Yours in Community Sports,

Johnny R. Misley  
Chief Executive Officer  
Ontario Soccer

Peter Augurso  
President/Chair, Board of Directors  
Ontario Soccer

#### **About Ontario Soccer**

Founded in 1901, Ontario Soccer is comprised of more than 550 Clubs and Private Academies servicing over 24,000 teams with 380,000 registered players, 70,000 coaches and managers, and 9,500 match officials, as well as countless volunteers, parents and supporters comprising a direct, multi-cultural community of over 1,000,000 Ontarians.

Ontario Soccer develops and delivers exceptional and sustainable programs and services throughout Ontario with the mission of providing leadership and support for the advancement of soccer in collaboration and cooperation with our membership, partners, and other stakeholders. Ontario Soccer also operates the Ontario Player Development League (OPDL) - the province's premier standards-based youth development program and proudly supports Canada Soccer's National Teams, the Canadian Premier League and Toronto FC.

An overall goal of Ontario Soccer is to assist with the equitable development of soccer as a healthy lifestyle choice, provide a talented pathway for players to excel and encourage inclusive community involvement at all levels.